

**ESCAPING THE RUSSIAN BEAR: AN
ESTONIAN GIRL'S MEMOIR OF LOSS AND
SURVIVAL DURING WORLD WAR II**

(KRISTINA VON ROSENVINGE)

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I am fond of pointing out that the safety and security we think we enjoy is, historically speaking, anomalous and ephemeral. This memoir, by the late Kristina von Rosenvinge, brings this truth to life. It is not a maudlin tale of woe. Instead, it is optimistic and grateful, even though the events it narrates, of her young life during World War II and immediately after, must objectively have been extremely trying. And since I am always looking for additional messages in books, aside from simple human interest, I found her story has much to tell us both about history, and about the future.

The villain in this book is clear, starting with the title—the Russians, who killed both of von Rosenvinge's parents and crushed her homeland, Estonia, for decades. While Russians as villains have recently come back into fashion, for a long time excuses were, and still are, made for the Soviet Communists. We were told that they were not comparable to the National Socialists and we should overlook the innumerable crimes they committed, even though they killed far more people than the Nazis, and their ideology was at least as evil. Thus, it is refreshing that von Rosenvinge doesn't apologize for painting the Russians as the bad guys, or for her family's role in fighting them.

She lost her mother when she was only two, in 1940. Her mother, Gunvor Maria Luts, Finnish by birth but married to an Estonian, was returning to her father's funeral in Finland when her plane, the *Kaleva*, was shot down by the Russians in June, 1940. (The reasons for this even today are opaque.) Thus, von Rosenvinge never knew her mother, and barely knew her father. After her mother died, she was adopted by her father's sister and her husband, who raised her, and whose name (Toffer) she took. The Communists, who occupied Estonia immediately after shooting down the *Kaleva*, were hunting her father, Hans Luts, because he was a successful businessman and had been in the National Guard. He thought adoption best to avoid his daughter also being disappeared, if he were caught. Soon after, eager to defend Estonia against the Russians

and to avenge his wife's death, he enlisted in the Waffen SS, which enrolled numerous regiments and divisions of ethnic groups desperate to find a way to defeat Soviet Communism. He was killed in 1943, by a land mine, fighting on the Estonian borderlands against the Russians. Again, properly and to her credit, von Rosenvinge spends no time in apologizing for this military service, treating as it was, the natural, and in fact the only proper, course for her father to take.

As always, upon their takeover the Communists unleashed a reign of terror in Estonia, which they incorporated into the Soviet Union. At this point, though, the Soviets were still allied to the Germans, and the Germans were more than happy to accept Baltic Germans, common throughout the Baltic nations, back into Germany. The Toffer family had enough German connections, and could speak enough German, to be certified as Baltic Germans (though the Russians had to agree in each case), and so they (by the skin of their teeth) were able to get on a train to Germany, leaving most of their things behind, facing life as refugees.

In a turn that seemed fortunate at the time, they only stayed in Germany a year, in a village east of Stuttgart, because soon enough, in 1942, the Wehrmacht kicked the Russians out of Estonia. That meant they could return, little thinking that the tide would turn yet again. Although Estonia had been ravaged, with tens of thousands in that small country having been killed by the Russians, for a child, life returned to a sense of normal. Not wholly normal; von Rosenvinge's life was punctuated by learning, at age five, that her father had died, and nearly every family had lost someone. And the Germans had no intention, either, of Estonia being independent, even if they did not engage in killings or terror—as long as you weren't a Communist or a Jew, though the former group deserved what they got, traitors to a man (my editorial comment, not von Rosenvinge's). But Estonian independence quickly became academic, as the Russians returned, in an even worse mood, so in late 1944, the family fled again.

The route they were able to find (unable to get Swedish or Finnish visas) was as shipborne refugees to Danzig, still in German hands. Their ship narrowly avoided sinking, when the other ship accompanying it was torpedoed by the Russians (no doubt because it bore prominent markings as a medical ship, which von Rosenvinge's did not). They were transferred by train to Austria, where they were fortunate enough to

be taken in by the parents of a German soldier whom the family had helped back in Estonia, and who had given them a letter asking his parents to help them. (Chance is often the determinant of whether a refugee lives or dies, or thrives or merely survives. We forget this, secure in our consumerist cocoons, which are far more fragile than they seem.) Thus, they were able to eat and find a place to stay. Soon the Russians entered Austria too. But fortunately, the Americans got to their town first, and there the family stayed. (Von Rosenvinge says that the townspeople greeted the Americans as “liberators.” That is highly unlikely; they may have been happy, but mostly because the war was over, and the Russian threat averted. To a little girl, though, that may not have been obvious. The suggestion that conquest of German-allied countries was liberation for their people, frequently heard, is mostly a reflexive falsehood, especially false when the Russians conquered.)

Conditions were rough, too, for some time. Food shortages were common, and food was supplemented by hunting for mushrooms and berries, and the locals were not wholly sympathetic to the refugees. Gradually the family settled in, finding decent accommodation and attending school. The Toffers also pieced together what had happened to the extended family, many of whom they had lost touch with in the chaos. We forget how the chaos of war leads to uncertainty about loved ones; in our connected world, we are always used to getting the latest information. Von Rosenvinge tells various stories, some funny, some clever, some moving, about her childhood life in Austria, a place she seems to look back to with fondness, as children often do of situations that are difficult for adults, no doubt because they sometimes miss the stresses that adults may be facing at the time.

Fearing the Russians would occupy more of Austria, the Toffers never got wholly comfortable, since the Russians sent any Estonian they could grab back to occupied Estonia. The Americans, fortunately, did not hand over Estonians, though their hands were not free from blood—they gladly handed over Russian soldiers and anyone accused, justly or unjustly, of war crimes. As with most refugees from countries conquered by the Russians, the alternative to staying in Austria or Germany, often the preferred alternative, was to resettle somewhere in the Free World, including advanced countries in North and South America, or New Zealand, or Australia. Unlike today, though, when for

some reason the rulers of advanced countries think that entrance by foreigners is a moral right that cannot be refused, to gain such entrance then one had to be sponsored by someone who guaranteed the refugee employment and living quarters, so he and his family would not become a public charge. The Toffers were able find a berth in Allentown; her adoptive father's skills at running a textile manufacturing plant helped. In 1952, they reached America, at which point von Rosenvinge ends her narrative.

Like most such involuntary expatriates, she maintained a strong love for her homeland, Estonia, and rejoiced when Estonia regained its independence in 1991. She adds an emotional postscript, of her trip to Keri Island, a tiny, uninhabited island in the Gulf of Finland. It is the closest point to where her mother's plane fell flaming into the sea, and in 1993 the Finns built a monument to the *Kaleva* and its passengers there. Her closing words are very moving; somehow she manages to avoid bitterness while at the same time not closing her eyes to the evil that men do.

Much of this has an eerie resonance for me, since there are many parallels to my own family's history, though ours was far less tragic. (In fact, I am working with my mother now on a lengthy work, to be privately printed and distributed to the family, which is designed as a historical document with my grandfather's contemporaneous diaries at its core.) My mother was born in Hungary and fled the Russians with her parents and sisters, in an Opel with "potato masher" grenades on the dashboard. They were refugees in Bavaria, also picking mushrooms (although she has been known to tease people by saying, "Of course, we only picked *gourmet* mushrooms"). My grandfather fought in the Hungarian Army; being in his forties, he was only drafted at the end of the war, and survived unscathed. But my mother's cousin, Gottlieb Ptacek, Czech by descent, fought with the Waffen SS, in the 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division, and was killed, probably dying in the Battle of the Bulge, or what he would have called the Ardennes Offensive. And my mother's family was similarly sponsored by Americans, made easier by that my grandfather was a physician, and thus had useful skills.

Von Rosenvinge seems to be of somewhat mixed mind about how American she became. Perhaps she is trying to avoid offending Americans, for many Americans believe that America is far superior

to any country in which anyone could have lived before, and that every immigrant is pathetically grateful for being admitted, since his life would have been worthless and meaningless in his home country. (A variation on this belief is the offensive trope that “We were born Americans, but in the wrong place,” as Jonah Goldberg approvingly quotes a Hungarian immigrant friend in his atrocious book *Suicide of the West*.) This belief is boiled down in the stupid poem by Emma Lazarus engraved on the Statue of Liberty, archly praising America for admitting “The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” Wretched refuse forced out by overpopulation some immigrants may be, but those forced out of their homes by Communism were the cream of the crop, superior in education and culture to most Americans. Immigrants may be grateful that the United States has given them a chance to rebuild their lives, but that is no reason to believe in every case that this is what they really wanted, or that they would not have eagerly returned home if they could have. Not to mention that unlike many immigrants today, refugees from Communism contributed greatly to America.

On a more detached historical note, today we do not grasp what life is like in unsettled times, and we cannot grasp the life of a refugee. This is a bit less true than it used to be, since the recent Middle Eastern wars caused by George W. Bush and Barack Obama’s delusional belief in imposing democracy on troglodytic cultures have exposed Westerners to far more images of refugees than they used to see. But it is easy to view refugees as an abstract problem; it is only concrete, for most people, to the extent we can see ourselves as the refugees, and that is most true when they look like us. It is instructive, I think, to view a compelling video created in 2014, during the beginnings of the Syrian civil war, showing how a young English girl becomes a refugee in some future English conflict. You will not see the world the same after you watch it (and if you are me, you will add to your stock of guns). Of course, in 2014 Syrian refugees were actual refugees from actual warfare, as opposed to the massive flood of millions of economic migrants who have followed, and been eagerly admitted by fools such as Angela Merkel, desperate to virtue signal and to destroy their own countries. But that is another story, and one not at all relevant to this outstanding book.